The Namdhari Movement

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III. The Namdhari Movement

1. **Origin.-** The annexation of the Punjab in 1849 as a Sequa to the two doggedly contested wars could not be expected to have reconciled the freedom loving people of Punjab to the British Government, which had long been looked upon as a potential enemy of the Kingdom of Lahore. Though beaten in the battle-field, they still believed that the downfall and dissolution of the Lahore Darbar was due as much to the treachery of their own leaders as to the sutle intrigues of the 'Farangi", who appeared to be always anxious to subvert the neighbouring sovereign independent kingdom. The accomplished fact had to be accepted, but still the religious minded and discriminating among the Punjabis felt sad and sullen at the loss of their hard won freedom which had been achieved after prolonged struggle and untold sacrifices. To all those who were conscious of self-respect, their subordination to all an alien Government was galling and was to be tolerated in mood of helpless surrender. The new political set up in the Punjab, however, prompted the more awakened to probe into the causes in to the religious degradation and political subjugation.

The advent of the foreign rule afforded an opportunity for religious and social reform because most of the prevailing ills of the people, consequent upon the establishment of British Government, were attributed to deviation from true religion and other social mal-practices. Organised effort on these lines was expected to give the disaffected new hope and provide a rallying point for such elements as might be looking for religious inspiration and social reform. The Namdhari Movement which had originated in West Pakistan shortly before the eclipse of the kingdom of Lahore was manly intended to bring about social and religious reform among the Sikhs. After the annexation of the Punjab political emancipation was also to form its ultimate aim, ever through it was not expressly declared for reasons of expediency.

The Namdhari movement is said to have been founded at Hazro (Attock District, West Pakistan) by Bhagat Jawahar Mal, popularly known at Sain Sahib, in the forties of the last century. The Sain Sahib and his disciple, Balak Singh, soon gathered a band of followers and started the propagation of their progressive ideas which aimed at purification of Sikh religion and removal of unhealthy social customs.

The movement assumed mass character under the leadership of Guru Ram Singh, who succeeded Baba Balak Singh. Born in 1815 at Bhaini Ala, tahsil and district Ludhiana, in the poor family of Sardar Jassa Singh, Baba Ram Singh had a religious bent of mind from early years. He had enlisted himself in

the Khalsa army under Kanwar Nau Nihal Singh and had come under the influence of Baba Balak Singh while posted in the region in 1838. he left the military service in 1845 and activity took up preaching against unwholesome religious and social practices among the Sikhs.

The circumstances outlined above were sufficient to cast Guru Ram Singh for the role of a religious reformer. He had witnessed the ruination of sovereign state of the Punjab, the depravity of the leaders of Lahore, stinking immorality of the courtiers, betrayals of army generals, and imperial treacheries of the crafty aliens. He had studied these things of close quarters. In these circumstances, the influence of Balak Singh must have convinced him all more about the need of introducing or restoring high moral standards either to restore national prestige or to save his people from further degradation. Thus early in 1857, when the country already stood on the edge of a mighty upheaval, Ram Singh began his mission[84].

84. M.M. Ahuwalis, Freedom Struggle in India, 1855-1909, pp. 245-46.

Under the inspiration of Balak Singh, Ram Singh founded on April 12, 1857, the Baisakhi day, a socio-political sect called 'Namdhari' at his native village Bhaini, where four Sikhs received baptism at his hands. "The tenets of the sect proclaimed Govind Singh as the only true Guru, who prohibited all worship save the reading of his 'Granth' and all employment of Brahmans, and in many ways revived the original doctrines of Sikh faith. This included the abolition of caste and of restrictions upon intermarriage abstinence from meat, Liqour and drugs, and comparatively frees intercourse between the sexes. The sectaries carried staves in their hand, tied their turbans in a peculiar fashion (Sidhi pag),wore a necklace of woolen cord tied in knots and a watch word known only to themselves[85]. To the points mentioned could be added a few more such as reverence for the cow, simpler wedding ceremonies and abolition of infanticide which were expounded with equal emphasis. The 'Namdharis, while reciting Sikh Mantras or repeating the Name, often developed emotions, screamed and shouted, turbans in their hands and hair streaming in the air, hence called *Kukas* or the shouters[86]."

85. D.C.J.Ibbeston, Report on the census of the Panjab, 1881, (Quoted in Ludhiana District Gazeteer, 1904, pp. 84-85)
86. G.S. Chhabra, The Advanced History of the Punjab,Vol. II,pp. 368-69.

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Baba Ram Singh was never reconciled to the rule of the British. His prediction about its early and was indicated by his prohibition to join Government service, to go to courts of law or learn the English Language. The movement thus acquired a distinct political bias. Its chief inspiration was, in fact, derived from opposition to the foreign rule and everything tending to remind one of it shunned. English education, mill-made cloth and other imported goods were boycotted. In its advocacy of the use of the Swadeshi and non-co-operation, the Kuka movement forestalled, in the sixties of the last century, an important feature of the nationalist struggle under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi[87]. Thus the Namdhari Movement may be described as a precursor of the Indian National Congress which adopted the principles as important planks of political programme.

87. Harbans Singh. The Heritage of the Sikhs, p.131

2. Spread of the movement.:- Guru Ram Singh fixed 22 preaching centres in different parts of the Punja, and in each one of these he appointed a Deputy Called *Suba.* Besides, Subas were also appointed in Gwalior, Hyderabad Deccan, Varansi, Lucknow, Nepal and Kabul. The institution of Subas was completed by 1864, and preaching Guru Ram Singh's message from place.

In the beginning, the districts of Sialkot, Amritsar, Hoshiarpur and Ludhiana formed chief centres of Namdhari activities as well. Not only Sikhs joined this Ferozepore, Lahore and Gujaranwala as well. Not only Sikhs joined this movement in great numbers, Hindus were also attracted towards it and by 1871, as revealed by Giani Rattan Singh in the court of Mr. Cowan, the Kakas numbered ten lakhs, of whom only one third were Kesadharis, the rest being all Sehjdharis. The Kukas were to be found in all professions. They were business-men, traders and merchants, and employed in Government and private service. They were especially keen to enlist in Police and Army, where it was difficult to ascertain their numbers, because they joined these services with purpose and never revealed their Namdhari Kuka affiliation.[88]

88. G.S. Chhabra, The Advanced History of the Punjab, Vol. II,pp. 369-70.

With the rapid growth of Namdhari movement Guru Ram Singh acquired great influence and importance. When he went on tours, his entourage consisted of number of his Subas and splendid horsemen, all in immaculate white dress.[89] He became the leads of he sect after the death of Baba Balak

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Singh in 1863, and his followers began to call him a Guru. He "declared himself to be an incarnation of Guru Gobind Singh, and , preached the revival of the Khalsa and the overthrow of the English Government."[90]. He is said to have asked his followers not to accept services under the Government, not to send children schools to Government schools, not to use courts of law but settle disputes in Panchayats, not to use foreign goods, and not to use Government postal services. Ram Singh is said to have openly declared that when one hundred and twenty-five thousand Sikhs would have joined him, the English would be defeated and fly from the country from Ghazani Calcutta.

89. Ibid.

90. D.C.Libbeston. Report on the Census of the Punjab, 1881, p. 138. (quoted in Ludhiana District Gazetteer, 1904, p. 85)

3. Activities of the Namdharis up to 1871.:- The Namdharis movement, particularly its socio-political character, had been causing anxiety to the Government since 1863, and they looked upon it as a source of great potential danger. It was reported that Baba Ram Singh had been carrying on secret negotiations with Maharaja of Nepal, and that a "Kuka' regiment had been organised in Jammu in 1870 with the connivance of the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir. The 'Kukas' were also believed to have propagated their doctrines among the native princes. But the truth of all these cannot be established with certainty. In any case, the Government kept a sharp eye on the movement and special precautions were taken from time to time to prevent large gathering og the Namdharis.

Prior to 1871, the main plank of activities of the "Kukas" was strong feeling against cow slaughter, especially the butchers who seemed to have been emboldened in their outrageous practiced under the British rule. After the annexation of the Punjab They had promised to continue Lahore Darba's prohibition against cow-slaughter. This was not, however, respected in practice soon after the advent of British rule in the Punjab and beef was openly sold in markets. To check his activity calculated to injure their religious feelings the Namdharis prepared a plan to murder the butchers. Such action brought them into an open clash with the authorities.

The establishment of a public slaughter-house near one of the gates of the golden temple at Amritsar and throwing of bones into a Hindu well provoked the 'Kukas", who murdered four butchers and wounded three others. In the course of a raid at Railkot in Ludhiana district, the Kukas killed three and wounded thirteen others. It is generally believed they were earning spiritual merit thereby others. It is

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generally believed they were earning spiritual merit thereby so although nine 'Kukas' were executed and two transported for life for these crimes. no legal action was taken against Baba Ram Singh.[91]

91. R.C.Majumdar, The History and Calura of the Indian people. Vol. IX, British Paramountcy and Indian Renaissance. Pt. I, p. 603.

4. Attack on Malerkotla and suppression of the movement.:- The severs punishments urged the 'Kukas' to greater activity as corroborated by the official report: "On the 13th January, 1872, there was a meeting of Kukas at Bhaini and a gang of about150 of these, after working themselves up into a state off religious Frenzy, started of under the leadership of two Jats of Sakraundi in Patiala territory. Ram Singh (who disapproved of this action) informed the police of their intention to do some mischief, saying that he had no control over them, but it was considered sufficient to see them out of our [British} territory. They were armed with axes, sticks, etc., only and are said to have declared that the town of Maler Kotla would be the object of their attack. They went to Pael in Patiala territory without causing any disturbances, and re-appeared next day near to Malaudh, the seat of Sirdar Bada Singh, which they made a sudden onset with the idea, probably, of getting arms and money, they are said to have wanted the Sirdar to lead them. In this attack two men were killed on each side and a few wounded, and the gang succeeded in securing three horses, one gun and one sword. No one joined them any where on their march, and they never numbered more than 150 men at the outside. They next proceeded to Kotla (the capital of small Mohammedan Malerkotla State), which is nice miles distant from Malaudh, and on the morning of the 15th made a sudden attack on the palace and the treasury of the Nawab: and pursued off when the Kotla guards had recovered from their surprise, and pursued to Rurr in the Patiala territory, where to the number of 68 they surrendered to the Patiala authorities. At Malaudh and Kotla, Mr. Cowan the Deputy Commissioner of Ludhiana, started for the latter place, and telegraphed for troops, which arrived soon after." Cowna ordered the 68 prisoners of whom 29 were wounded, be sent to Malerkotla where by his order on January 17, 1872, at 7 o' clock, 49 of them were blown away from 7 guns.[92] One was cut to piece when he rushed forward to attack to the Deputy Commissioner. There was not ever the semblance of trial. A summary trial was, however, held by Mr. Forsyth, Commissioner, Ambala Division, in respect of the remaining prisoners who were also executed[93] on the following day.

92. Parliamentary Papers 356 (East India Kooka Outbreak), 1872, 11.

93 Shakuntla, Miss., A Brief Account of Namdharis, pp. 14-15. A fair is also held at the place to pay homage to Namdhari martyrs.

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Messrs Cowan and Forsyth took an unduly serious view of the Kuka activities , in which connection reference may be made to letter No. 857, dated April 30, 1872, from the Secretary to Government of India, Home Department, to Officiating Secretary to Government, Punjab, (quoted by G.S. Chhabra, The Advanced History of Punjab, Vol. II p. 377.)

Baba Ram Singh had always been kept been under surveillance by the British Government. Although no legal action was taken against him for the murder of butches, he and some of his principal followers were interned with in their villages and a body of police was posted at Bhaini. The restrictions were partially removed in 1866, but Baba Ram Singh was held responsible for the outrage of 1872, through he had disowned the band of his followers who attacked Malaudh and Kotla, and kept the People informed of their activities.

After this occurrence, the Government acted promptly and ruthlessly to stamp out the movement. The Lt. Governor ordered the arrest of Guru Ram Singh and his influential lieutenants. The headquarters at Bhaini was raided and Kukas there numbering about 200 were taken to Ludhiana and sent to their respective districts. Namdharis were treated as members of a seditious organisation and the assembly of more than five Namdharis was forbidden. Their movements were watched, reported and regularized from village to village. [94]

94. Shakuntla, Miss, A Brief Account of Namdharis, 99. 14-15

The Namdhari movement was thereby successfully suppressed. There is hardly any doubt that the rash action of a small group of the over zealous among the Kaks, undertaken without the approval of their leader, was largely responsible for the unexpected and speedy end of the movement.[95]

95. R.C.Majumdar, the History and Culture of the Indian people, vol. IX. British Paramountcy and Indian Renaissance, pt. I. p. 904

5. Activities of the successors of Guru Ram Singh.:- Guru Ram Singh was deported to Rangoon in Burma where he was kept as a state prisoner. His brother, Hari Singh was also not allowed to move out of village Bhaini. Nevertheless, desperate efforts were made from time to time by the Kukas to contact their imprisoned Guru. Many secret dispatches of Ram Singh were occasionally captured from the persons of 'Kukas' who risked long journeys merely to have a look at their spiritual leader. [96]

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96. M. M. Ahluwalia freedom struggle in India, 1858, 1909, pp. 250-52.

From Bhaini, Hari Singh also strove to send his secret emissaries to the Russians on the one side and Guru Ram Singh at Rangoon on the other. Some of these secret communications were intercepted by the British authorities. They arrested Gurcharan Singh[97] (inhabitant of Chak Ram Dass in Sialkot District) in 1880, because he, along with Shankar Rai, Maya and Badh Singh was the carrier of letters between Russians and Hari Singh.[98] The authorities also removed Guru Ram Singh from Rangoon to an island prison at Mergui, where he was kept under heavy guard. The Kuka contacts were, therefore, snapped, although not totally.[99]

97. G.S.Chhabra, The Advanced History of Punjab, Vol. II . p.375

98. *Shakuntla*, Miss, *A Brief Account of Namdharis*, P. 15.

99. *Department of Home* (*Judicial-B*), *Progs*. 142-46 of April, 1881, Letter No. 1.

The last days of Guru Ram Singh's imprisonment were tragic. His prolonged detention and solitary confinement, at last exhausted the patience with which at first he bore it. Weakened by old age and after suffering repeatedly from dropsy, general debility and dysentery, the State prisoner Guru Ram Singh was said to have died on November 29, 1885, at 4-30 p.m..[100].

100. *Department of Home* (*Judicial-B*), *Progs*.236-40 of *June* 1882 (M.M. Ahluwalia *Freedom Struggle in India*, 1858-1909, pp. 253, 385-87).

Guru Ram Singh disappeared from the political scene in 1885, but his work and inspiration continued among his numerous followers. He was succeeded by Guru Hari Singh, who was not allowed to move out of his house in village Bhaini for 21 years till his death in 1906. Guru Hari Singh was succeeded by Guru Partap Singh. Throughout the period until the attainment of the Independence in 1947, the 'Kukas' remained active fighters against the alien rule. Their hostility and non-co-operation with the 'Farangi' never subsided, although the baits offered to them were substantial and the oppression practiced on them extremely trying. During the World War I (1914-18), the British Government tries to appease them by land grants and through some other means, but failed to entice them and had to use to tyrant's rod.

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When Gandhi started the non-co-operation movement, the Namdharis responded to his call and zealously supported the national struggle. Gandhi ji himself is said to have borrowed certain features from the Namdharis to reorientate the Congress campaign for the liberation of the country.

Today, the Namdharis form a distinctly cohesive group among the Sikhs. Two thing immediately mark them off from the latter-the style of their hand-gear and their adherence to the personality of their leader. Appareled in immaculate white home-spun, they wind round their heads mull or long cloth without any semblance of embellishment and without giving it any sharp, emphatic lined[101].

101. Harbans Singh, *The Heritage of the Sikhs*, p. 137.

IV. New Phase of Freedom Movement

The Great Revolt of 1857 was ruthlessly suppressed and the unsuccessful participants were subjected to merciless repression and reprisals in the form of indiscriminate executions, imprisonments, confiscation of property and withholding of pensions, etc. The atrocities committed by the British in the name of restoration of order left behind a trail of smouldering bitterness.

"The members of the revolution, however, were not altogether extinguished : they lay smouldering and some one would arise here and there, to kindle them into a flame[102]". This was amply borne out by the persistent opposition to British rule carried on by the Namdharis under Guru Ram Singh and his successors, who with their puritanical way of living, and their determined faith in the nationalistic ideals had become the precursors of freedom struggle in the country.

102. Gulab Singh, *Under the Shadow of Gallows*, pp. 1-2.

The active participation of the famous maulvi family of Ludhiana in the Great Uprising of 1857 and the presence of some other prominent nationalist-minded Muslim families at Ludhiana as also the existence of the headquarters of the Namdhari Movement at Bhaini Sahib (near Ludhiana) produced far reaching effects upon the political and social life of Ludhiana district. Under the influence of these patriotic forces, the atmosphere in the district remained free from narrow communal feelings. Later on,

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Ludhiana became the chief centre of the Ahrar Movement among the Muslims. The Ahrars agitated against the British imperialism in collaboration with the Congress. An active body of freedom fighters, the Ahrars propagated nationalistic ideas among the Muslims in the teeth of opposition from their co-religionists. It is, therefore, no wonder that the nationalist forces have all through remained ascendant, and right uptil the achievement of Independence, the district enjoyed almost complete communal harmony.

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